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RICHARD FRANCIS BURTON; BRITISH CONSUL IN SYRIA AND LEBANON 1869-1871

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INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1869, Richard Burton was recalled from his position as Her Britannic Majesty's Consul in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and posted to Damascus. It was a position he had long coveted and it was also one that he was perhaps uniquely qualified to hold for not only was he fluent in Arabic (one of 29 languages he spoke and wrote) but during 8 years of British Army service in India he had made a detailed study of Islam, especially Sufism, and he was knowledgeable about Arab culture.

Fifteen years earlier, aged 33, he made a *haj* disguised as a Pathan pilgrim, and he wrote about this experience in *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Meccah and Medinah*, arguably one of the greatest travel adventure books of the nineteenth century. Since then he had 'discovered' Lake Tanganyika during a four year exploration of East Africa while attempting to find the source of the Nile, written 14 books, and had served as British Consul in West Africa and South America.

His brilliant and aristocratic wife Isabel joined him in Syria in December 1869, and they set up home in Salihiyyeh, now a suburb of Damascus, but then a discrete village a short distance from the ancient walled city. From the surviving accounts of contemporary expatriates, and those who lived in Syria under British protection, Burton was a fair and wise administrator, but he quickly made a number of powerful enemies.

First, he declined to follow his predecessor's example of accepting gifts in exchange for favours, which infuriated the Turkish *Wali* [1], Governor of Syria (which then included Beirut) who had enjoyed 'an arrangement' with the previous British Consul. Burton also refused to imprison petty debtors for a clique of Jewish usurers who claimed British protection under an agreement with the previous Consul. Having discovered peasants imprisoned for years over debts of a few piastres Burton set them free and when the lenders complained he dismissed them contemptuously as 'Shylocks'. He went over the head of the British Consul General in Beirut [2], who was both afraid and jealous of Burton and therefore a dangerous enemy, and not least Burton angered British missionaries in Beirut [3], by formally castigating them for taking Anglican prayer books into the prisons of Damascus, then a hot bed of political and religious intrigue following the 1860 massacre of Christians.

Within a short time all these disadvantaged per-

* Mary S. Lovell is the author of a biography of the Burtons; see *A Rage to Live* (pub: Little Brown, London, and W.W. Norton, New York) 1998.

1 Mohammed Rashid Pasha 1830-1876. He was deported from Damascus in chains in 1872 accused of maladministration, and assassinated in Constantinople in 1876.

2 Mr. Jackson Eldridge.

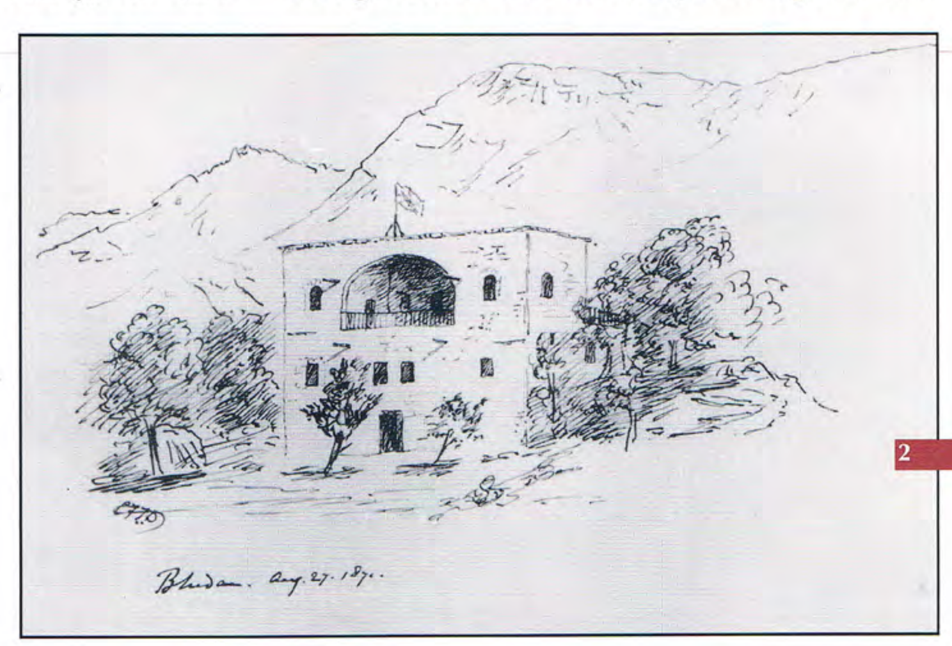
3 Mentor and Augusta Mott. Mentor Mott was an Anglican missionary. His wife Augusta was Superintendent of The British School in Beirut. Burton regarded them both as fanatical zealots.

4 Sir Henry Elliot.

sonalities began writing strong letters of complaint about Burton to the Foreign Office in London using powerful allies such as the British Ambassador in Constantinople,[4] and the President of International Jewry, to support demands that Burton be replaced. These representations accused Burton variously, of making the Wali's job as governor untenable; of antagonising orthodox Moslems because of his *haj*; of antagonising Christians by favouring Islam over Christianity, of anti-Semitism; and of turning a blind eye when Isabel, a staunch Roman Catholic, proselytised Moslems. Pretty well the only thing he was not accused of was corruption, and with hindsight it is clear that Burton's real failing was a signal lack of tact. However, faced with a barrage of complaints over many months the Foreign Office took the matter seriously.



Unaware of the concerted campaign against them, the Burtons worked happily in Syria and made many good friends including the romantic personalities Jane Digby el-Mezrab, Abdul el Khader, and leading Bedouin sheikhs. Burton quickly organized a conference of the leaders of all the factions that made Damascus a notable flash-point; the Chief *Mufti*; the Patriarchs of the Greek and Syrian Orthodox Christians; Druze and Marronite leaders; foreign missionaries based in Damascus; and the senior Rabbis. That he impressed all these people is proven by the fact that later, together with British subjects domiciled in Syria, they provided supportive testimony for Burton's submission to the Foreign Office that the complaints against him



1 The Burtons house in Salahyeh, near Damascus, painted by Sir Frederick Leighton RA. Leighton stayed at the house in 1872.

2 The Burtons cottage in Bludan, where he famously insructed Isabel to 'pay, pack and follow'. Sketch by Charles Drake.

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were unfounded and false. These statements prove that Burton was held in great esteem [5]. There is also ample evidence that during his time in Syria, Burton was personally responsible for quelling a major potential insurrection, which Damascene residents feared would lead to a repeat of the 1860 massacre.

The Burtons also found time to travel; they made an unescorted trip to Palmyra (then a 10 day journey through a hostile area of desert); Jerusalem and the Holy Land; through the Jordan valley; and various short trips in Lebanon, notably to the Cedars and the ancient coastal towns. Among Burton's many accomplishments was a keen interest in archaeology and he produced a two-volume book, *Unexplored Syria* [6], about his findings and observations of sites in Syria and the Lebanon. Isabel wrote a best-selling two-volume memoir of her domestic observations during her two years in Syria under the title, *The Inner Life of Syria* [7], which despite its chatty nature is still an invaluable reference book for researchers of 19th century life in Damascus. For both of them their period in Syria was the happiest time in their lives.

On August 16th 1871 Burton was summarily recalled to London by the Foreign Office. He left Damascus within the hour, sending a telegram to Isabel in their summer cottage in the hills at Bludan, famously instructing her simply to 'pay, pack and follow.' Determined to say goodbye to him, she jumped on a horse and galloped alone through the night to Shtora, where she caught the coach to Beirut which she reached just before he sailed. Later that year, when they were together in London, the couple mounted a spirited defence of what amounted to Burton's ignominious dismissal. Eventually the Foreign Office were forced to admit that he was innocent of all charges and made a veiled apology, but refused to allow him to return to Syria.

Burton spent the remainder of his life vainly trying to obtain a posting to an Arab country. Instead he was given a sinecure job as Consul in Trieste where he died in 1890, a few months short of retirement. The advantage to posterity of this inappropriate use of a man of near genius, is that it enabled him to produce a further 30 books, including his famous unexpurgated translation of *The Arabian Nights*, and scores of academic papers and learned articles. Original editions of Burton's works now command thousands of dollars from avid collectors around the world.

5 Public Record Office Kew, London; Ref F078/2259.

6 *Unexplored Syria*, Visits to the Libanus, the Tulul el Safa, the Anti-Libanus, the Northern Libanus and the Alah; by Richard Burton, with contributions by Charles Drake (of the Palestine Exploration Fund) and Isabel Burton. (Tinsley Bros, London) 1871.

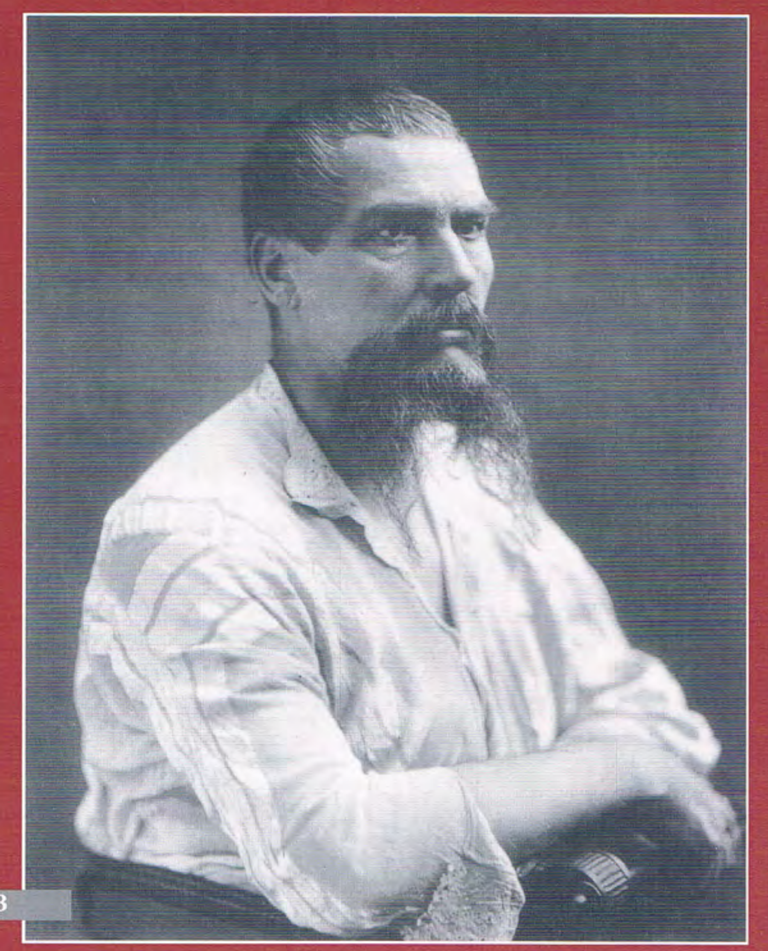
7 *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Land,* (Henry S. King, London) 1875.

3 Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) while he was serving as HBM Consul in Damascus.

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACTS ARE THE RECORDED OBSERVATIONS OF THE BURTONS AS THEY ARRIVED, SEPARATELY, AT BEIRUT IN 1869.BEIRUT

RICHARD BURTON, SEPTEMBER 1869:

"We disembark at the hopeless, wind-lashed roadstead of Beyrout, within the limits of the Land of Promise, but never yet included in the Land of Possession. The trim



little harbour-town, seated upon its sloping amphitheatre converted into "Colonia Julia Augusta Felix Berytus" must have been a local Pompeii in the fourth and fifth centuries, and its feminine bust was found associated with the medallions of Alexandria and Halicarnassus. During those ages the Roman and Egyptian galleys jostled one another in the inner port, which now looks like a dock; their palaces and villas covered the slopes with pillars and colonnades; paradises and gardens contrasted with proud fanes rising upon well-wooded and well-watered peaks around - fanes dedicated to gods and goddesses now remembered only by classical dictionaries. In those days students of philosophy and theology of law and language flocked to Berytus from the most distant lands. But the terrible earthquake of A.D. 551, which laid waste a pleasant site, seems to have been the turning point of its destinies; the roadstead apparently became shallow, and despite a noted miracle in the eighth century, Beyrut saw her glory depart for many a generation. At last, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had sunk to its lowest, and the petty port, placed under the unimportant Pashalate of Sidon, numbered barely five hundred souls.

Sir Charles Napier, the sailor, changed all that. In the autumn of 1840 he made Beyrout his headquarters, whence he and his gallant crews ranged the hill country around and blockaded the ports, till the career of Ibrahim Pasha was unfortunately cut short... the headquarters of the Pashalate were transferred from Sidon to Beyrout; European merchants established country houses; missionaries opened schools for both sexes; the different consular corps contended for the construction of roads and the abatement of nuisances; whilst the port was regularly visited by four lines of steamers. Briefly, Beyrout became the only Europeanized place in Syria, and she will probably remain so for many years.

The old part of the city still retains some marks of Orientalism the old part, with its alleys, wynds and closes, its wretched lanes, its narrow and slippery thoroughfares, resembling unroofed sewers, is particularly sombre and Syrian, full of dead men's bones and all uncleanliness. Nothing can be meaner than the Customs House, where millions of piastres annually change hands. Of the stately buildings which once adorned it no traces remain but three granite monolithic columns, still towering above modem misery. But the new town, which surrounds the ancient archery, is Levantine — that is to say, almost Italian; the points of difference being a scatter of minarets and a sprinkling of tropical vegetation, which tells you you are somewhere nearer the sun. There are houses and hospitals large enough each to house its battalions; piano and bugle sounds catch the ear; the carriage is taking the place of the horse and the mule — here as in South America, a sure sign of civilization.

Beyrout is connected with Damascus by the only

carriageable road in the Holy Land ... .The distance is forty-seven and a half geographical miles, prolonged to sixty by the old road and to seventy-two by the new. We [may] travel to Damascus by night coach or by day diligence. Preferring the latter, which enables us to see the land, at 4am we leave the harbour-town, and we shall reach our destination at 6pm. The section between the Mediterranean and Damascus, the sea and the Euphrates Desert, is an epitome of Syria, which has been described to be an epitome of the whole world; a volume might easily be written upon what is seen during the day's journey. After a couple of miles through sub-urbs, cemeteries, and scattered villas, orchards of mulberry and olive, lanes hedged with prickly pear and dense clumps of young stone-pines, the road begins to ascend the westward, or maritime, slope of the Lebanon. It works gradually towards the left bank of the great gorge called Wady Hammanah, in one of whose hamlets Lamartine lived and wrote. After some twelve miles from the Beyrout Plain, we reach the watershed of the Jurd, or Highlands of the Lebanon. Here we are about 5,500 feet above sea level, and feel immensely relieved, in fine weather at least, from the damp heat of the malarious seaboard [8]" .

Isabel Burton, December 29, 1869:

"In the morning... we anchored very early off Beyrout. We had fortunately a calm sea, for it is a very difficult and an utterly exposed landing, an



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open roadstead in a bay formed by the Nahr el Kelb. Beyrout is charming as viewed from the ship. The town, which begins at the water's edge, and whose base is washed by the blue Mediterranean, straggles along a fair line of coast, and crawls up part of the lower hills. The yellow sand beyond the town, and the dark green pine forests which surround it, contrast well with the cobalt-coloured bay and the turquoise skies. It is backed and flanked on its right by the splendid

8 *Unexplored Syria; op cit.* vol 1.

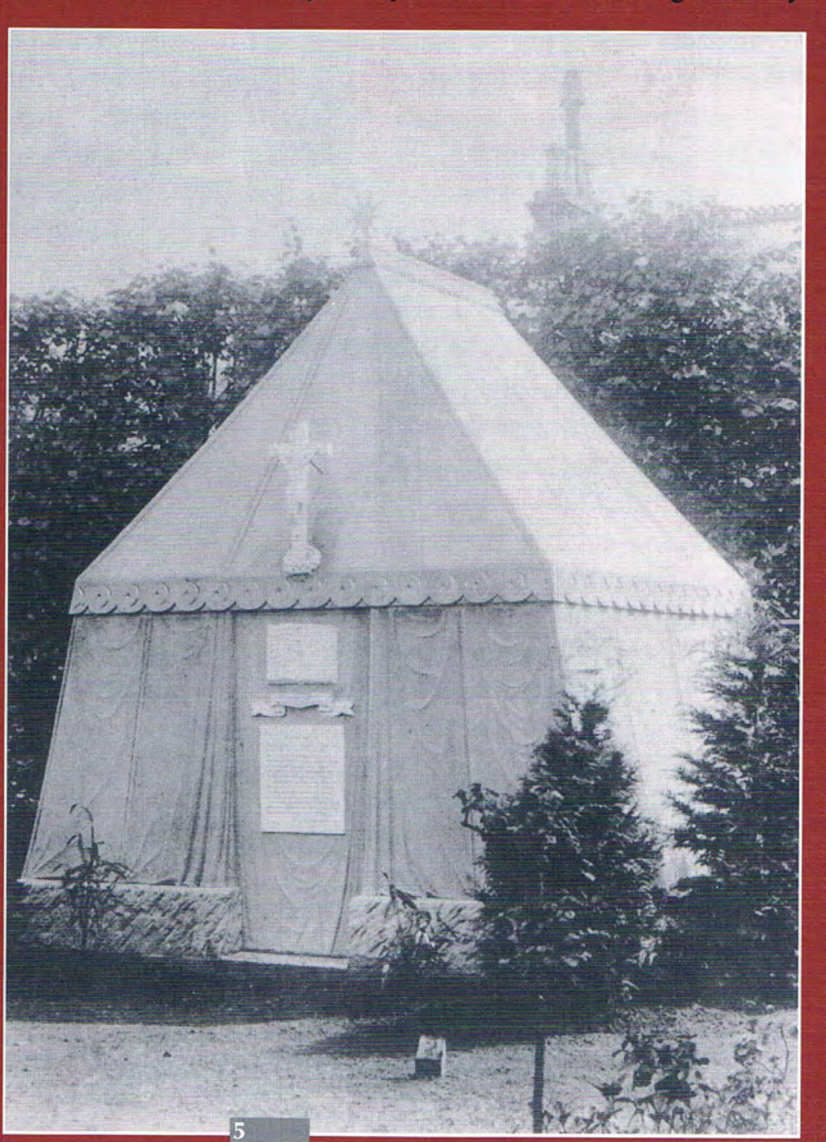
9 *The Inner Life of Syria, op cit.* vol 1.

4 Isabel Burton (1831-1896) while she was living in Damascus where her husband was British Consul.

5 Burton tomb in the shape of an arab tent. Churchyard of St Mary's Magdallen, Mortlake, Surrey. Contemporary photo.

range of Lebanon, upon whose steep sides the rising sun casts delicate lights and shades... the villages in some places appear to overhang the sea.

There are two domed ruins about half an hour out of the town eastwards, which look red like bricks, but they are, I am told, made of the common stone of the country. They mark where St. George killed the dragon - a feat which took place in more sites than one. The air is redolent with the scent of pinewood: every town in the East has its peculiar odour, and when you have been in one you can tell where you are blindfolded... The perfume of pinewood reached us even on board the ship, and it was deliciously refreshing; I no longer wonder that the wise men of the west have found vanilla in the bark...



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At 9 o'clock am Mr. (Vice-Consul) Jago kindly came on board and, offering me every assistance, took me ashore with my baggage. The landing consists of a few old steps, and a dirty, fish-bespattered quay. I was led to what appeared to me, then, to be a small but clean and comfortable hotel, facing the sea — "The Bellvue"*, kept by Andrea Pancopoulo, a Greek. This later on became to my eyes the centre, the very acme of civilization. During our two year stay in Damascus, Beyrout was our Biarritz, and Andrea's the most luxurious house in Syria... Beyrout, according to some historians, is the ancient Geris, founded by Gergeseus V., son of Canaan, son of Ham (Genesis x. 16); others say it is a Phoenecian town, built 21 years before Christ by Ithoba'al, King of Tyre and Sidon. There is no doubt of it's being the Berytus of the Romans, and its coins are well known to Eastern collectors...

Twenty-four hours suffices to see everything in Beyrout, which contains about 72,000 inhabitants.. The houses are remarkably handsome; the bazaars are very poor... ..Beyrout is a demi-civilized, semi Christianized, demi-semi-Europeanized town with a certain amount of comfort and European manners and customs: it enjoys perfect safety, being on the coast, with soldiers and policemen, and ships lying under its windows, it has free communication with Europe by post and telegraph — in fact it is somewhat more European, or rather Levantine, than Oriental [9]".

* See p.69.